

THE BANNER SERIES OF SELECTED SHORT STORIES

T WAS at a time when widespread distrust of banks led to the hoarding of money in safety deposit vaults that old Colonel Fuller was robbed, and it was then I first met Whispering Smith. The Colonel was rich, but money, of which he had an abundance, was not the only thing that troubled him. The Colonel had what his friend, young Dr. Mercer, pronounced a rheumatic disease; other people called it profanity, but terms are a matter of taste. Dr. Mercer, house physician at the Richelleon, advised him to drink one quart a day of French vichy, and forbade him the red meat.

This prescription cost the Colonel considerable money, for the Doctor's fees were high. But the Doctor is dead long since, and the Colonel is dead, and with them it is now less a question of rheumatism than of ventilation.

"The Colonel is prostrated; he has asked me to look after the thing, Willis," said I, after telling the story, "and, frankly, I'm floored. I know something—not much—about the law of corporations, but I'll be hanged if I'm any good at recovering stolen property. Something must be done quick. If the case was yours, Willis, what would you do?"

"Lyman," replied Willis, "at that time manager of the Richelleon; if the case was mine I'd send for Whispering Smith. He looks after things like this. And I wouldn't lose any time, either."

"You would put the best detectives at work?" I asked anxiously.

"I would," answered Willis Howard; "but I would put them at work hunting up Whispering Smith."

"Do you mean to say you wouldn't put the Buckhams on the case at once?"

"Not till I'd seen Whispering Smith."

At eight o'clock that night Willis Howard brought Whispering Smith to my room.

"Mr. Morse," announced Willis, addressing me briefly, "this is Mr. Smith. I have outlined the matter to him. When I get into serious trouble around this house I turn it over to Mr. Smith. He would like to hear the details."

"They are distressingly few, Mr. Smith," said I, shaking hands with the long-sought Whispering. "Colonel Fuller went this morning to draw some money from his safety deposit box and found the box empty, except for some papers of small value. The last time he locked it up it contained \$200,000 in currency."

Whispering Smith looked at me with some surprise.

"Mr. Morse is a friend of mine, Gordon," put in Willis Howard. "I'd like to see you do what you can for him."

"You're Mr. Lyman Morse, of Finch, Fuller, Lynde, Morse & Sietson," remarked Whispering Smith, suddenly cataloguing our firms. I acknowledged the directory, noticing there for the first time the peculiarly ragged quality of voice that gave Gordon Smith his nickname. "I met you once before," he continued.

"Not to my knowledge."

"Does Colonel Fuller drink?" he asked abruptly, ignoring my disclaimer.

"Not unless you call a bottle of claret for dinner drinking," I replied, rather appealing to Willis Howard.

"No," confirmed the manager, "he doesn't drink, Gordon."

"Any drug habit?"

"We shake our heads."

"Sure of that?" he persisted. "We were sure."

"What about women?"

"There isn't one in the world." All of which astonished Mr. Smith varyingly. "Then let's go see him," he proposed, rising.

The Colonel lay in bed. Dr. Mercer and Leslie de Rose, the Colonel's young nephew, sat with him. I asked the Colonel to tell his story. Whispering Smith looked anxiously about the room.

"I drew the money from the Western National," began the Colonel brokenly, "just two weeks ago. After the New York banks quit paying out I thought I'd have the staff handy for a turn, and I made three checks, two for \$50,000 and one for \$100,000. The money was given me in large bills. There was one package of \$100 in \$100-bills; the rest was in \$50 and \$1,000 bills, I think. I'm not sure he groaned. "I'm not sure of anything but that I'm ruined."

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